

Living apocalyptically in uncertain times

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The Bible's apocalyptic texts emerged out of contexts of great crisis and hardship, and so they offer us valuable resources for living with uncertainty. I will explore some of these resources by focussing first on Revelation's Christmas story and its aftermath. Then I will step back to reflect on some larger apocalyptic perspectives.

Revelation's Christmas story (12:1–17)

Symbolic language makes Revelation's Christmas story challenging to interpret, which probably explains the church's unfortunate neglect of a profound story that should be included among our repertoire of Advent readings. Unlike the nativity stories in Matthew and Luke that seek to provide at least a somewhat realistic account, Revelation's version is entirely

figurative because it seeks to portray the consequences of Jesus's birth, not the circumstances.

The story begins with a great heavenly sign, a pregnant woman in labor, wearing a crown of twelve stars (12:1–2). Twelve is the biblical number for God's complete people, indicating that the woman represents God's people. Another heavenly sign appears, a ferocious

dragon with seven heads and ten horns (12:3). The dragon represents Satan (12:9), his multiple heads and horns symbolizing his power, ferocity, and deviance from normal creatureliness.

The dragon's tail sends a third of the stars crashing to earth, demonstrating the threat he poses to God's creation. He also threatens God's saving purposes as he attempts to devour the woman's child immediately after birth (12:4). Readers should hear echoes of Matthew's Christmas story in which the brutal Herod attempts to kill infant Jesus, murdering Bethlehem's baby boys in the process. Revelation implies that the power of Satan manifests itself through the brutal deeds of tyrants like Herod. In



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Revelation's woman gives birth to a son destined to rule the nations (12:5), indicating that he is Jesus. The child is immediately whisked out of danger and taken to the throne of God. God's throne is a foundational source of hope in apocalyptic literature, as illustrated, for example, by the book of Daniel. In a dream Daniel sees a succession of vicious beasts representing a series of oppressive earthly empires, the last being particularly brutal (7:1-8). The scene shifts to the heavenly realm where God

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sits on the throne in majestic splendor (7:9-18). In God's throne room Daniel sees all the beasts destroyed and hears that God's eternal kingdom or reign will be established on earth and given to the faithful (7:11-18). The apocalyptic visions in Daniel probably emerged during the harsh repression of the Jewish people by Antiochus Epiphanes (167-164 BCE). Most commentators view the last particularly vicious beast as an allusion to Antiochus and his brutality.

Daniel's vision acknowledges the suffering of the faithful but then reminds them that God still sits on the throne. God seated on the throne is a central apocalyptic symbol asserting that God always remains sovereign Lord, even when destructive cosmic and human powers afflict God's creation. Apocalyptic literature claims that the God seated on the throne will not forever watch evil prevail on earth but will intervene to deliver the faithful and establish God's healing reign.

In Revelation's Christmas story, the birth of Jesus initiates a chain of events beginning with the archangel Michael leading God's angels in battle against the dragon and his angelic forces (12:7). The dragon, now identified as Satan, is defeated and cast out of heaven along with his angels (12:8-9). The birth of Jesus sets in motion the final defeat of Satan and his forces. Heaven and its residents are called to rejoice (12:12a) because:

*Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of his Messiah. (12:10a)¹*

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

While the kingdom of God is now fully present in the heavenly realm, on earth it is a different story (which is why in Matthew 6:10 the Lord's Prayer teaches us to pray that God's kingdom may come to earth as it is already present in heaven):

*But woe to the earth and the sea,
for the devil has come down to you
with great wrath,
because he knows that his time is short! (Rev 12:12bc)*

Because of Jesus's birth, Satan's days are numbered, and so he is determined to wreak as much harm on the earth as possible. Small wonder that there is so much turmoil on the earth.

The dragon immediately pursues the woman who birthed Jesus, but she is delivered, the earth itself protecting her (12:13–16). The enraged dragon proceeds “to make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus” (12:17bc). This statement identifies the woman as the church and believers as her children, warning them to expect opposition and persecution because the dragon wages war against them. However, the dragon will never be able to destroy the woman/church because God protects her (12:14–16).

In the next vision a terrifying beast arises from the sea (13:1–2). The dragon gives his power, throne, and authority to this beast, creating an entity we might call the dragon-beast system. Similar to how the beasts in Daniel symbolize oppressive empires, the dragon-beast represents the Roman Empire. Revelation signals this by describing how the dragon-beast exercises authority over the peoples of the world (13:7–8), controls world commerce (13:16–17), dominates kings (17:18; 18:3, 9), operates a massive mercantile system (18:3, 11–19), and sits on seven hills (17:9), as the city of Rome did. Revelation calls the dragon-beast “Babylon” (14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21). Given that ancient Babylon was the evil empire that had destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BCE and that Rome had done the same in 70 CE, Revelation's early readers would have understood that Babylon meant Rome.


Following the consolidation of the dragon-beast system, God unleashes a series of massive calamities to destroy it (15:1–17:18). This leads to heavenly celebration over God's destruction of Babylon the great (18:1–19:8). Then Jesus returns to earth as a rider on the white horse, followed by the armies of heaven. As king of kings and lord of lords, he defeats the dragon-beast and all its supporting kings and armies (19:11–21). This

paves the way for God's renewal of heaven and earth and the arrival of the New Jerusalem, the perfect city of God (21:1–22:5).

Unmasking reality

Apocalyptic literature is challenging to interpret because we moderns are not familiar with its symbol system or style of communication. Yet, the Greek verb *apocalupto* means to reveal, uncover, or disclose. As Barbara R. Rossing observes, “Apocalypses pull back a curtain so people can see the world more deeply—both the beauty of creation and also the pathologies of empire, experienced as plagues against creation. Apocalypses show us the throne of God, the Alpha and Omega. Then they take us back to our lives with our vision transformed, . . . to live according to an alternative community vision.”²

Rome claimed to be a divinely sanctioned empire, providing its citizens with peace, security, prosperity, and civilization. Revelation draws back the curtain to reveal that the empire embodies the dragon's power and authority. Its satanic character is evident in its extractive economy,



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slave trade, persecution of Christians, idolatry, brutal militarism, conquests, and repression of subject peoples. Revelation pulls back the curtain to reveal that tyrants like Herod act satanically when they commit atrocities.

Apocalyptic symbols can help us unmask the pretentious evil powers of empire in our time, challenging us to discern how they are instantiations of the dragon-beast. As I write these words, a dragon-beast is committing atrocities

and devastating Ukraine. Not so long ago a dragon-beast based closer to home rained destruction on Iraq and Afghanistan through massive bombing campaigns. The dragon-beast of fossil fuel extraction seeks to dominate our planet, regardless of harm to ecosystems and climate.

By portraying the dragon-beast, or Satan, as the driving force behind oppressive empire, Revelation reminds us of the deep power of evil and the cause of much uncertainty in our world. As Ephesians reminds us, we

² Barbara R. Rossing, “The World Is about to Turn: Preaching Apocalyptic Texts for a Planet in Peril,” in *Eco-Reformation: Grace and Hope for a Planet in Peril*, ed. Lisa E. Dahill and James B. Martin-Schramm (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 141.

struggle not “against enemies of blood and flesh” but against “the cosmic powers of this present darkness” (6:12). We should never be naively duped into believing that evil and oppression can easily be overcome by a few social programs or educational campaigns, as valuable as these might be. By exposing the depth and power of evil, apocalyptic literature provides a realistic image of what we are up against and what faithful resistance might cost us.

The throne of God and the promise of victory

When apocalyptic literature pulls back the curtain, it does more than expose the world’s evil. It also highlights two closely related fundamental sources of hope: despite the world’s turmoil God still sits on the throne, and this sovereign God will intervene to right the wrongs of history. When Daniel’s world is gripped by horrific evil, the curtain is pulled back to reveal that God is seated on the throne and will establish God’s kingdom on earth (Dan 7:1–18). Revelation

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mentions the throne of God thirty-nine times. In the book’s pivotal vision, John is invited into God’s magnificent throne room where God is adored and worshiped (4:1–11). John also sees the Lamb who is worthy to break the seals of the scroll (5:1–14). As the scroll is unrolled, a series of divine interventions transform the kingdom of the world into the kingdom of God and God’s Messiah (11:15), leading to deliverance of the faithful and destruction of persons

currently destroying the earth (11:18). Revelation’s final vision portrays God’s renewal of the cosmos and the perfect New Jerusalem descending from heaven to earth (21:1–22:5). God and the Lamb sit enthroned in the New Jerusalem, and from their thrones flows a river that nourishes the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations (22:1–2).

Apocalyptic literature pulls back the curtain to assure the faithful that no matter how chaotic, oppressive, and painful their current circumstances are, they can be confident that God still sits on the throne. God’s sovereignty constitutes a promise that the suffering of the present is temporary, that ultimately God’s healing purposes for the world will prevail, and then human faithfulness will be rewarded.

The call to faithful resistance

Apocalyptic literature seeks to nurture a spirituality and community of resistance.³ There are few times when such resistance is more crucial than when evil is rampant and the pressures to accommodate are enormous. Revelation addresses seven churches, symbolizing the entire church, admonishing each to steadfast endurance and faithfulness (2:1–3:22). As heavenly voices celebrate the fall of oppressive Babylon and the dragon-beast, one particular voice cries out:

*Come out of her, my people,
so that you do not take part in her sins. (18:4b)*

Whereas financial advantages impel most persons to accept the mark of the beast (13:16–17), only the name of God and the Lamb are inscribed on the foreheads of 144,000 faithful persons, symbolizing their counter identity and illustrating that it is possible to resist and “come out of her” (14:1–5).

When Revelation’s Christmas story celebrates God’s salvation resulting from the defeat of the dragon, it makes a remarkable claim about Christian martyrs:

*But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony,
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death. (12:11)*

Whereas Jesus Christ is God’s primary means to defeat the dragon, human faithfulness also contributes. Christ-followers conquer the dragon in two ways.⁴ One is through “the blood of the Lamb,” which must mean something like faithful commitment to the crucified Christ. Christ-followers also conquer through faithful witness that may lead to martyrdom. The power and character of the dragon become instantiated in the Roman Empire. God utilizes faithful human resistance to the brutality of empire in the process of conquering the dragon-beast.

Revelation acknowledges how challenging and costly such resistance can be, given how powerful the forces of evil are. It seeks to nurture faithful resistance by repeatedly reminding Christ-followers of the rewards awaiting them in the new age (1:3; 2:7, 10–11, 17, 26–28; 3:5, 12, 21;

3 Rossing, “The World Is about to Turn,” 144, 149, 152.

4 Rossing, “The World Is about to Turn,” 148.

5:10; 7:9-17; 11:17-18; 14:1-5, 13; 15:2-4; 19:9; 20:4-6; 21:3-7, 27; 22:1-5, 12-17). Such promises of rewards in the next life can nurture an unhealthy other-worldliness, as they do in some forms of Christian piety. However, they can also empower this-worldly discipleship by reminding us that God will ultimately reward faithfulness and the sacrifices it may demand.

Living apocalyptically

Jewish apocalyptic imagination embraced a two-age scenario. Because the present age was in the grip of evil forces, it would take God's dramatic intervention to defeat these powers and establish the new age of God's reign on earth. Early Christians adopted and adapted this apocalyptic two-age scenario. They believed that Jesus was God's Messiah who inaugurated the new age and kingdom or reign of God. However, it was obvious that Jesus's ministry did not represent God's cataclysmic intervention that defeated all evil and established God's full rule over the world. Therefore, much of the New Testament maintains a lively hope that Jesus will return to complete the task of establishing God's healing reign within all of creation. Many early Christians lived with an "already not yet" mentality. Jesus had partially inaugurated the apocalyptic new age, gifting his followers with a foretaste of its blessings. However, the complete establishment of this new age and the fullness of its salvation awaited his return.

In the old age or reality outside of Christ, the powers of sin, illness, death, and Satan still hold sway. But because Jesus has inaugurated the saving reign of God on earth, Christ-followers already experience partially the blessings of the new age. Someday Jesus will return to complete his ministry of defeating all anti-godly powers. Then the reality of the new age will entirely transform the old.

Christ-followers live in the overlap between the two ages, which explains much about our lives. Christ delivers us from the painful and sinful realities of the old age, but because the reign of God is only partially here, we still live with one foot firmly planted in the old age, partially subject to its limitations. Hence, we still sin, suffer, and die. But we also live in the new age in Christ and receive its gifts of grace, healing, and fruits of the Spirit. Christian discipleship involves leaning ever more into this new age and letting its realities, rather than the realities of the old age, shape our character, identity, and lifestyle. God calls the church to be the foretaste and showcase of the new age in Christ so that the world can see the new age at work in the life of the church and individual Christians.

Conclusion

As we live in uncertain times, apocalyptic texts provide us with imagery for naming and confronting some of the evil powers at work in our world. By reminding us of the depth and power of these forces, apocalyptic passages keep us realistic. At the same time, these texts provide us with deep sources of hope. No amount of uncertainty and evil can ever displace God from the throne of the cosmos. In Christ we catch the vision of God's new age, and we are blessed with a foretaste of its benefits. With the help of God and the faith community we can resist the destructive powers of the old age and live as new age people amid the wreckage of the old, secure in the promise that someday God's new age will fully arrive to transform the world, including our lives.

About the author

Dan Epp-Tiessen is retiring from twenty-five years of teaching Bible at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He increasingly appreciates apocalyptic texts.